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THE

HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

OF SOUTH CAROLINA.

PAPERS—1889.

MEMOIR

OF

PROFESSOR F. A. PORCHER,

LATE PRESIDENT OF THE SOCIETY.

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At the regular annual meeting of the South Carolina Historical Society it was moved that a Committee be appointed to prepare a memorial of their late President, Professor F. A. Porcher, with resolutions expressing their regard for him while living, their value of his services, and regret for their loss. The committee consisted of Messrs. J. J. Pringle Smith, J. W. Barnwell, and George S. Holmes. At the next meeting the following was presented and unanimously adopted :

In the death of its late President, PROF. F. A. PORCHER, the Historical Society deplores the loss of one whose qualities, both natural and acquired, eminently fitted him for that high position.

Mr. PORCHER, descended from Isaac Porcher, a Huguenot, was born in 1809, on his father's plantation, Cedar Spring in St. John's Berkeley. His father died when he was but little more than three years of age. His childhood was passed on the plantation in winter, and in summer at

Pineville, where he acquired the rudiments of education at the village school, kept by Mr. Stevens. At the age of nine years, Adams's Latin Grammar was put in his hands, and in it he was thoroughly drilled. The art of good reading was also carefully taught by the assistant teacher, Mr. Service, an Englishman. When about twelve years old his mother began to spend a part of each year in Charleston, and he was sent to Mr. Dickson's school. With that school he was taken after two years, to the Charleston College, (re-organized in 1824,) where Mr. Dickson, as also Rev. Mr. Gilbert, and Mr. W. E. Bailey became teachers, carrying with them their pupils. His class ranked as the freshman, numbering about eighteen. His next step I give in his own words. "It would have been well for me had I remained here, but the scheme of the Military Academy got between me and these solid advantages, and in April 1824, I left college to attend Capt. Partridge's Military Academy, which had not long before been opened at Norwich, Vt., and which was attended by a large number of South Carolinians." He seems not to have thought much of this school, and in April 1825, he left Norwich for New Haven.

After preparation during the summer under a private tutor, he entered in September, without difficulty, the Sophomore class at Yale College. At the age of nineteen he was graduated.

On his return to Charleston he read law in the office of Messrs. Mazyck and Frost, but these studies were interrupted by the desperate illness of his mother. Then family affairs required his presence in the country.

In 1832, at twenty three years of age he was chosen a member of the Legislature. In evidence of his modest estimate of self, let me quote his words, "why did I wish to go to the Legislature? I was just twenty three years of age, inexperienced and ignorant. I was well posted in Federal politics, but in all other matters, ignorant. Why then should I desire to become a Legislator? It was nothing but the vanity which sought a petty distinction. But for this I would have bided my time. I would have studied something more

useful man Federal politics, learned something about the State and the people, learned at any rate something on which I might claim to be an authority, and then I might have made my mark."

In the Spring of 1835, while attending a Brigade encampment, he was seized with hemorrhage from the lungs. This left him in such feeble health, that he determined to make a voyage across the Atlantic, and remain some time in Europe. There he spent eighteen months, devoting himself to the cultivation of his mind and taste. Of this period of his life he says, "I soon discovered that I was a very ignorant person, and made every effort to improve myself. * * * While I might appear as an idle loungeur wasting my time and money, I was really, seriously engaged in trying to learn. When away from home and among strangers, I began carefully to examine myself. I blushed at my ignorance, and wondered how I could ever have had the presumption to set myself up as a public man." Does not this convey a valuable lesson?

Future years evinced the signal success of these efforts to learn, efforts which indeed continued to the end of his useful life.

On his return home in Nov. 1836, he found he had again been elected member of the Legislature. The Presidential election was about to take place, and an incident may here be narrated which is not without historic value as illustrating a tenet of that day, that allegiance to party was secondary to loyalty to principle. Mr. Porcher was through life of the strict construction, States-rights school. The question before the Legislature was whether either of the two great contending parties deserved the support of the State? Several resolutions were offered in the house of Representatives. Among others one proposed was that the State had not a right to cast a blank vote for President.

Mr. Porcher tells us, "I proposed that as it was an awkward and rather illogical process to vote affirmatively on a negative proposition, the resolution be amended by striking out the word "not" * * *. The mover was so startled at

that being called an Amendment which directly contradicted his resolution, and manifested it so loudly, that the House caught the humor of the thing and carried the Amendment by acclamation."

In 1838 he was again returned to the Legislature, but after serving this term he withdrew from political life. All these preferments were unsolicited, indeed his elections took place during his absence from home.

In 1848 Mr. Porcher was called to the chair of History and Belles-lettres in the College of Charleston.

From childhood Mr. Porcher was remarked for his love of study and the proficiency he acquired; and as life advanced, his time was entirely devoted to literary pursuits, and to the instruction of others. In his special department, his lectures, his frequent addresses and essays, all gave evidence of thorough research and classic taste.

His patriotism was pure and unselfish. His love of his native State and pride in her history, were prominent traits. His contributions to her literature, were frequent and of high order. Among others may be mentioned his account of Craven County, his memoir of Gen. Gadsden, and many articles in Russell's Magazine. His concern extended to all literary institutions, chief among them the Charleston Library, where a portion of every day was spent. Of that Society he was a member for more than half a century. Of this, the Historical Society, he was one of the founders in conjunction with distinguished members of our community, J. L. Petigru, Dr. Moultrie, Mr. King, Prof. Rivers, Dr. Dickson, Dr. Holbrook and others. Founded in 1855, it flourished until 1860. Its operations were interrupted by the late war and not resumed until 1875, when it was reorganized chiefly through the efforts of Mr. Porcher, he becoming President. We cannot forget the pleasure and concern he took in all its affairs. His genial qualities and engaging conversation added greatly to the interest of our meetings, diversifying the routine of business by the charms of social intercourse.

Of Mr. Porcher's domestic life, this is not the place to

specie. Better it to say that all the happiness which flows from perfect family concord and affection was his.

His personal traits are so well remembered that no more than allusion to them is needed here. In a high degree he exhibited that independence of thought, that strong individuality which characterized the people of this State. And thus he followed not the multitude, nor was afraid of being charged with paradox, knowing as he said, that often "the paradox of one age is the established truth of another." For instance, differing from reformers who would have children receive what is called practical, or rather "utilitarian" education, he declared "the best indication of a good classical education, to be the purity and simplicity with which English is written and spoken."

His opinions were formed and his conduct guided not with a view to their agreeing with maxims unquestioned and popularly received, but that they might be consistent with conclusions reached from this as a premiss, viz., (in his own words) that though "mankind is in possession of a vast amount of truth which has descended from generation to generation, and which we do well to adopt as a guide in life, yet it is no less probable that with this truth is mingled a great deal of error." Still his kindly disposition made him tolerant of the opinions of others.

His elevation of mind and thought will best appear from his own noble words, which apply perfectly to himself, and with which this imperfect tribute may appropriately conclude. "He who from the restless activity of his own thought endeavors to pierce into the obscurity which envelops human wisdom, is the friend, not the enemy of his race. If there is on earth anything which is absolutely good, it must be truth. Emanating as our spirits do from the Source of all truth, surely every process which preserves our souls from error, which disturbs and dispels the cloud that hovers about our intellectual vision, must lead us forward, nearer to the Author of our being, and bringing us nearer to Him, must infuse into our souls a more perfect sentiment of happiness. The truth is to free our souls from

burial. Surely then he who earnestly seeks after her must be considered friendly to the best interests of humanity."

Resolved, 1. That the Historical Society hereby places on record their testimonial of the high estimation in which they held the services of their late President, Prof. F. A. Porcher, and their deep regret for their loss.

Resolved, 2. That in his death, the whole Community sustains the loss of a valuable member. Adorning the office of an Instructor of youth, his useful and blameless life was itself a lesson to all, his kindly nature won universal regard, his purity of character, his unselfish patriotism, his independence of thought, entitled him to a high place among those whose walk in life exerted a potent influence for good, and whose memory men will not willingly let die.

Resolved, 3. That a copy of these proceedings be sent to his family.



